

Post-militarised Spaces in Post-Socialist Cities: the case of the military domain in Bitola

Mladen STILINOVIC

PhD doctoral candidate
 Doctoral School of (Bio)Engineering,
 Department of Architecture and Urban Planning
 Faculty of Engineering and Architecture
 Ghent University,
 E-mail : mladen.stilinovic@ugent.be

Abstract

In this paper I discuss the particular actors and agencies in the post-socialist cities which attempt to re-use the post-militarized spaces – a process that involves the local urban designers of the late socialist and early transitional generation mostly. In a nutshell, the transformation process of the large scale Cold War military heritage brings particular challenges, due to the dual nature of the military institutions in this period, that is being both 'invisible' and 'omnipresent'. Such double figure comes from the prominence of the restricted access areas designated for exclusive military use and the involvement of the military institutions in multitude aspects of the local civil societies, including the spatial planning itself. The changing role of the military allows for a critical observation of the fundamental shift throughout which 'taskscape' dissolve – leaving spatial and functional voids as areas where new urban features are eventually produced. In this paper I will present the case study of the military domain in Bitola, a small city in former Yugoslavia. The city has a history of strong military presence, and yet during the socialist period the area of the military domain itself became a secluded area – a situation that continued well into the post-socialist period up until few years ago.

Keywords

military-civil relations, actor-network, post-socialist, post-militarized territories

1 Introduction

My research investigates the large-scale remains of military activities from the Cold War period, with an aim to provide a meta-perspective on the post-militarized spaces and their different developmental trajectories, such as heritage status, re-qualification or destruction. The research is conducted on the evolution of the remains, the discourses concerning their transformation and the relevant heritage policies.

The artefacts of Cold War military spaces are being (re)interpreted in the frameworks of different landscape transformation processes. Each process is a result of negotiations performed within what Latour (2007) refers to as networks, that involve a myriad of actors and agencies, with often conflicting views on the meaning and the significance of the artefacts. My research seeks to identify and describe the role played by the urban designers, their motives and rationales, as well as the planning paradigms and methodologies they adhered to.

To achieve this, I am conducting both an analysis of the available plans, images and policies as well as interviews with the relevant actors. In order to provide a comparative

framework, my research looks into examples of transformation of post-militarised areas that have strong relations to (peri)urban tissues and are situated both in the post-socialist as well as in the Western European countries.

In this particular article my intention is to describe the dynamics of transformation in a post-socialist small city. To do so, I will first discuss the observed interlude during which the military domains in the post-socialist countries have experienced a notable decay. This will be followed by a short historical overview of the 'being there' (Woodward, 2004) of the military institutions in the selected case study for this article: the military domain in Bitola, now North Macedonia. In this nowadays small city distinct has a long standing history of spatial patterns being generated by and for the accommodation of the military institutions. Looking at the socialist period, I will elaborate on the dual notion of the military as 'invisible' and 'omnipresent'. Then I will describe the ongoing transformation process of the military domain and finally I will outline some of the particular challenges in the approach of the local urban designers that have been involved in this process.

2 The multiple ends of the Cold War

Not long ago, the perceived end of the Cold War was considered as ‘a major historic event that signals the end of the (potentially) destructive hostilities’ (Fukuyama, 1992). Meanwhile, a different kind of warfare emerged - notably after the events of ‘9/11’, while the doctrine of the Mutual Assured Destruction remains effective. The military institutions in the Western countries have been continuous transforming beyond the end of the Cold War, for which substantial budgets were available up until the economic crisis of 2009. This allowed for a certain level of maintenance as well as opportunities for ‘re-qualification of the militarized areas, and introducing heritage protection policies’ (Cocroft, 2009).

In the East, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the Soviet Union, and Yugoslavia, followed by the expansion of the NATO pact towards east brought significant changes to the structure and by extent the spatial presence of the military institutions. Both the pre-existing and the newly formed military forces in the post-socialist countries went through a period of economic hardship that eventually resulted in their downsizing. Nowadays, it is only the Russian Federation and to some degree Belarus and Ukraine that maintain a significant military-industrial apparatus.

The transformation process of the military institutions in the post-socialist cities was at first a protracted one, due to the economical transition and in some cases the ongoing armed conflicts. The resulting in-between period of the post-socialist (non)occupancy has mostly resulted in a decomposed ‘taskscape’ (Ingold, 1993). Namely, cities where the military institutions were provided for a significant number of employments were unable to mitigate the impact on the local economy and by extent the level of services. After the period of ‘decay’, the neo-liberal policies place pressure on state-owned properties and create a drive for providing ‘opportunities’ for new development regardless of the shrinking tendencies. In face of this, there is often a lack of professionals as well as urban activists that can raise the overall debate on the future of these sites – which is especially the case in the smaller cities. Moreover, the former secluded nature of the sites makes them ‘invisible’ for the general population.

3 The (pre)socialist city and the military

It was in the late 19th century that the Ottoman Empire conducted large infrastructural works for its military institutions in Bitola, at the time known as Monastir. The scale of these interventions was in stark contrast with the

rest of the urban tissue – yet no material boundary was established between the military grounds and the residential areas. During the WW1 most of the city and the immense barracks were destroyed. The monumental urban renewal plan from 1929 designated the same area for use by the military and proposed ambitious structures. Little came to fruition and overall the city recorded no significant development until the socialist period. (Figure 1)

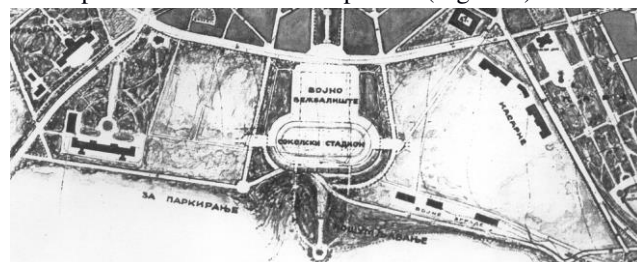


Fig. 1 An extract from the Regulation plan for Bitola from 1929 by Dušan Miroslavljević (Source: Archive of North Macedonia)

The Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) was seen as the constituent force of the Socialist Yugoslavia, part of the ideological trinity of the workers, youth and soldiers. After the WW2, Bitola remained a garrison-city, a distinct functional role that brought in a significant population made up of officers and their families. The importance of the military institutions surpassed that of the local ones, as despite the relative infrastructural growth Bitola could never rise beyond being a provincial centre. In such setting, the JNA maintained a very prominent i.e. ‘omnipresent’ appearance through various buildings and structures as well as through the social and cultural role played by the Officers' House. Transfers of building or ensembles nevertheless did occur: the old Ottoman military school and the Old Military hospital became a City Museum and a student dormitory respectively. However, given the centralised organisation of the socialist Yugoslavia, the spatial negotiations and the decision making in regard to the military institutions were conducted in secrecy and at higher level of governance.

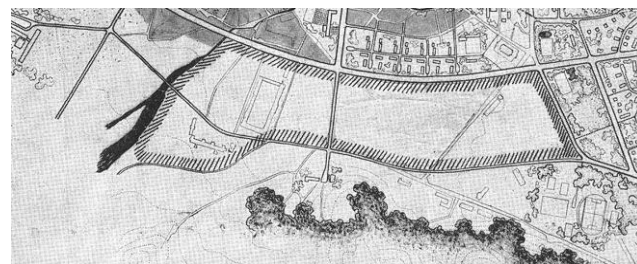


Fig. 2 An extract from the Directional plan for Bitola from 1952 by Vladimir Antolić (Source: personal collection)



Fig. 3 The urban part of the military domain as shown in the Cadastral Survey for Bitola (Source: State Authority for Geodetic Works, analogue cadastral survey, composite from sheets at 1:1000)

4 The enclosure

The gradual enclosure of the military domain in Bitola occurred in the midst of the Cold War period when JNA moved towards an ‘Occidental’ military model, wherein the military forces tend to be more reliant on professional soldiers as well as to maintain a level of secrecy, i.e. to be ‘invisible’ (Virilio, 1994). The plan of 1959 already delineated the military area as a separate one, albeit allowing for certain axes to cut through it. (Figure 2) Yet after 1970, a uniform fence was erected along the borders of the domain with the urban areas, running several kilometres in length – which in turn disrupted the relation between the structure of the militarised areas and the surrounding urban tissue. Finally, the overall appearance of the domain was transformed toward a ‘campus’ model, according to the prevailing urban planning concepts of the time: street patterns with a functional layout and dispersion of building surrounded with abundant vegetation.

In a nutshell, the domain became a highly restricted area while the military still presented itself as the People’s Army. Even more, such off-limits status was by no means limited to the perceptions of the general population. The designated area was excluded from the scope of almost every agency that dealt with space and landscape features, the flood protection system perhaps being one sole exemption. No land surveys were conducted, while the zoning plans assigned the area a special status. (Figure 3)

5 The gradual abandonment and decay

The first abandonment of the military domain occurred in the aftermath of Macedonia’s independence referendum of 1991 when the retreating units of JNA were given instructions to take as much as possible with them. The Army of Republic of Macedonia (ARM) was hastily formed upon the ruins of the previous military presence – yet its paradigm hardly differed from its predecessor, and

moreover there was no immediate change in the structure of the local authorities or planning regulations. Nevertheless, the effects of the new constellations on the city were multiple: there was a sudden loss of a particular population strata i.e. the officers and their families as well as a reduction in the number of conscripts. Finally, the period of transition to a market oriented economy ensued and the immigration to Skopje, now the capital city of an independent state, as well as to abroad begun to increase.

Following the armed conflict of 2001, the military conscription was abolished and the personnel was gradually reduced. In parallel, a wave of decentralization policies occurred, giving more power to the municipal level authorities. Two most visible effect of the these developments were the transformation of the military HQ into a Town Hall and the fall into decay of the Officers’ House. As for the domain itself, entire areas were no more used and the overall maintenance level declined.

5 The new plans

Around 2003, during the procedures for the preparation of the new General Urban Plan (GUP) of Bitola the first push for a transformation of the military domain occurred. It was led by Gjorgji Jovanovski, an engineer and a prominent member of the local council. As the decision making power regarding the militarized areas remained at a higher level, such efforts bore no changes to the GUP and moreover no public or professional debate took off whatsoever. Nevertheless, in 2007 another substantial transfer occurred as the westernmost part of the domain was ceded to the local university.

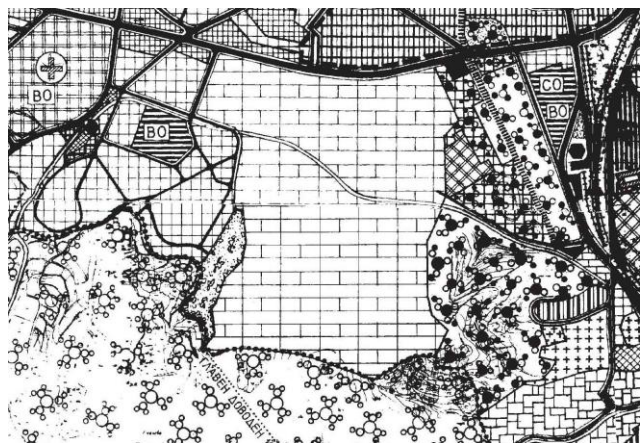


Fig. 4 An extract from the General Urban Plan of Bitola (Source: Second changes to the GUP from 1989 by the Town Planning Institute - Bitola)



Fig. 5 Composite plan of the DUP (Source: DUP ARM 1, 2 and 3 from 2014 by Formi urban planning, composite by the author)

It took until 2015 when the central government decided to offer the areas of the former barracks in several cities for development. Making use of the political alignment, the Ministry of Defence led the process using the 'project' rhetoric, resulting in an overall top-down approach, meaning the municipalities were involved in a limited way. Even though, the chosen sites for transformation differed in size and importance and yet the very same approach was used. Namely, certain buildings which were still fit for use were transferred to the local government and the rest of the terrain was to be divided into lots for sale. For the latter, the Detailed Urban Plan (DUP) was chosen as a tool, as it provides for both plot division and a description of the required infrastructural works. (Figure 4)

However, as the military domains were still assigned as special areas in all the concerned GUPs, and amending them remained a lengthy procedure, the government modified the urban planning law and circumvented the hierarchy of urban plans, allowing to directly proceed towards making a DUP. The plan was delineated by the property limits of the domain meaning there was a rigid border on the proposed transformations, which contributed to actually reinforcing the existing 'border'. Such scope of the plan was in many ways difficult to tackle, both in technical terms but also on conceptual level, as there was no programme brief or any sort of competition whatsoever.

In such circumstances, with the task of preparing the planning documentation came along the responsibility for not only drawing up the conceptual design for the domain but the very program itself. An informal initiative on the later was taken by the biggest local urban design office: Formi, which was then given the overall assignment. The owner of the office, Jorgo Shundovski as well as some of the senior staff at the time represent a direct link to the long-defunct City Planning Bureau, the institution that was in charge of preparing the GUP's in the socialist period

and shortly after. According to Shundovski, his proposal for the programmatic possibilities for the area of the military domain stems from the discussions between the professionals at the Bureau who envisioned a secondary city centre that would take away the pressure from the old city core. In the conducted interview he has insisted that the transformation process will take 'more than a decade'.

In 2011 the entire project was presented to the general public as the 'Golden hill', a small elite city within the city. The local municipality raised a substantial loan in order to build the basic infrastructure and several large apartment blocks are built already, but there are almost no public amenities yet and the entire area could still be described as a large construction site. Finally, only a handful of the pre-existing structures were kept, while a vast amount of the vegetation inside of the domain was lost. (Figure 5)

6 Conclusion

The protracted abandonment of the military domains in the post-socialist cities led to a material decay and was eventually achieved in altered political, economical and urban planning circumstances. Despite the nominal decentralisation efforts, small cities like Bitola seem to have already lost both the tools as well as the human and economical potential to plan their urban development accordingly. As in most post-socialist cities, the vast potential of the former military domains is reduced to an opportunity for acquiring state-owned land. The selected planning tools and regulations do not take into account the size, the inherited structure and the possibilities for (re)establishing continuities with the surrounding urban tissue but rather provide legal and technical details only. Finally, the lack of both public and professional critical voices and creative input is a missed opportunity to enhance the process.

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